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ABSTRACT

Writing in the first person is not usually tolerated in academic writing under the illusion that the third person insures some kind of objectivity. But writing in the first person is honest, permitting the reader to know that what is being said is a matter of opinion. It is a direct way of speaking about what a writer sees or feels or thinks, and provides an essential detachment for the mind, for ideas and feelings. Perhaps students would think as well as observe, come to conclusions, have opinions, start to speak out with individual voices, persuade, and influence if they were permitted to write in the first person. (HOD)

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THE WRITER'S I

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The writer's I is not the writer. I is placed upon the page, and it behaves like the dog that has squeezed between the guests' legs and escaped the house.

"The first person is usually not tolerated in academic writing under the illusion that the third person insures some kind of objectivity."

That silly I. It escapes and then when it has its freedom, it usually doesn't know what to do with it - produces a flat statement or usually sets up a straw person - a mock academic - to bark at.

"I woke and watched himself waking. They - did all those theys that ran this place have I's or were they always theys to themselves - would watch him, too, but their doctorates were in psychology and they didn't realize the subversive power of I."

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Whoa. Just like I. Too conservative one moment and then charges off like that. You can never tell what I's going to say. Well, perhaps the paranoia about they is significant. But this isn't supposed to be creative writing. This is serious stuff - a paper for 4 C's.

"Even in the most solemn academic writing, there is always a secret I lurking behind the prose, ducking behind a pile of discarded rhetoric, peeking out - sneakily - between clauses."

Cute I, real cute. But maybe you're on to something. O.K. Go on.

"I is honest. The reader knows that what is being said is a matter of a opinion. There's less foolishness about the discipline speaking or what is being said being supported by scientific evidence. It's I speaking."

This may be an interesting point to pursue, I. What we do in schoolis to learn to camouflage I, not be objective but to sound objective.

'I gets mad when professors - and journal editors - say 'Do Not Use The First Person.' I claims they are always the most opinionated ones. You should see the letters they write to the Dean, 'I, for one, certainly do object to a policy that will most certainly lower the standards of this already entirely too vocational public university. I stand for increased standards you must recognize that I practice what I preach when I face my classes. And I am proud, whatever your committees may opine, that I have had the discretion not to publish until I am quite prepared." And he's against using the first person? I suggests that his vertical I should be ..."

Here, here, I. Slow down. I does teach me something when it runs off like this. There's strong feeling here but that contentious voice will just produce static. Too bad I can't speak a bit more rationally. There may be a real issue. I certainly is het up and so are the people on the other side. They really seem to fear I and, of course, I just thinks its snobbery and prejudice.

"It's not only academics. It's parents and government agencies and corporations. They all seem frightened of me. I, after all, doesn't really have that much power. I is not stronger than the content of the writing. I points out that there are other persons - she and he and you. I only wants a fair share of the action. I is just a nice, direct way of speaking about what a writer sees or feels or thinks. Honest. Clean cut. Responsible. Accountable. Direct. It's hard for I to imagine why I terrifies people."

That's the issue: Why the fear?

"I is a mirror. I reveals the writer to the writer."

Can't you stay on the subject, I? You had something interesting going on and now you're running off in another direction.

"But I am not the person who wrote me. Never. I am more and less. The daughter who won't speak in class and has a career in the theatre. It's like that. The writer puts I on the page and I becomes a familiar stranger. The alien guest. Alien lover? Linguistic betrayer?"

Too much, I. Too much. Always reaching for those clever phrases. Don't you realize that clever phrases can take you off track? Lead you where you have no intention of going?

"I help the writer escape himself, herself. It's not so comfortable doing that as people may think. I mean it sounds like fun, a night on the town."

I won't get any sympathy from me. He's here with all the contradictions pulling against each other. I isn't me. I doesn't have to be consistent. I can play games, dress up, become any of my me's.

"A writer is always watching his I when it gets loose on the page. Some freedom. It's like (he'd say as if) I is a bug, a speciman, something to be examined. How'd you like to be studied?"

It is a kind of sneaky fun to watch what I does to listen to what I says. He's a devil that one. I suppose the reason the writing desk attracts me is that there's no telling what I will say. I's an old dog now but he still chases cats and unicorns and cars and squirrels, dogs in heat though he's too old to do anything about them. That I keeps me young, just watching him sniffing along, alawys dreaming he'll smell that glorious, ultimate stink.

"Everyone underestimates I. Thinks I's some kind of hound dog, just running around hollering at the moon. This playing isn't as easy as it looks. Have you ever chased a unicorn? I was chasing a unicorn once and flushed a whole book. That writer would never have caught it out of the corner of his eye, if it hadn't been for I. zig zaging through the woods, tail up nose down. D.M. never intended to write any of the books he's written. And yet he treats I as if I was some kind of stenographer, ready to take down what he thought he would say. And look at him. He's eaten pretty well on I's chasing cats and squirrels even if there have been a few skunks and porcupines along the way."

I thinks the writer sits down with purpose and intention. Not this writer. Here I is all upset about prejudice and underestimating people and I speaks as if the writer were a rhetoritician. Talk about calling people names. I runs and the writer follows. Writers know that, they call it thinking.

"I doesn't like to talk about it much, after all I doesn't have a degree or a leather couch but if it weren't for I....Let's face it, I sees the writer at the edge. Over the edge sometimes, headed right for Bug Ranch when old I arrives. Sometimes it's like a dream. Old I can say, "I hate my mother" or something corny like that and it helps that writer. I does the dirty work and the next thing you know that writer is whistly at the word processer. Belive me, I've seen it"

I's seen it. He's been there.

"The writer's I is not the writer. Damn good thing, too. Let's use the word: Therapy. Say it right out loud: THERAPY. Make those people who are scared of I, shiver in their shorts. You don't teach writing so students can fill out job application forms, those things are usually filled out after you've got job anyway. It's old I. That't the reason for teaching writing - or should be. I gets it all out where it can be looked at, examined. It provides an essential detachment for the mind, for ideas and feelings."

I sure does need an editor. But, although I has gone to far again, I has flsuhed out a central issue again. The writer's I is good therapy for the writer. Think writers are nuts, you should see one without an I..

"Readers like I."

Poor I. Dosen't realize that popularity doesn't help, not with those people who do not approve of I. Of course the reader likes I. The reader likes to meet another individual, a person that walks off the pages, sits down on the couch, starts talking face to face, doesn't speak like some institution or agency, just a regular guy. Someone named Harold or Linda. That scares people, too. Use I and someone might listen, understand, even do something.

"I is a snowy owl
high in a tree
watching the superhighway
for spattered pets."

Yck. Knock it off I. That's not poetry. I type lines so they look like poetry. Always foling around. I dosen't realize you can make mistakes. Big mistakes. This is serious stuff, an academic paper, and I goes fooling around again. How does I ever expect to join the club? I doesn't even know that there is such a thing as a genre hierarchy. That exposition is the real thing. Can you

believe it? In a department meeting last week when X was criticized for allowing one creative paper in Freshman Composition I - who probably feels a need to stand up for single letters like X, said, "I notice that in the literature courses you make your students read Shakespeare and Toni Morrison and Chaucer and Wallace Stevens and all the other Great Expositors.' I can't ever stay on the track, keep shut the mouth - at least until after tenure."

"The way I gets into trouble, it may not be a good idea to allow students to have I's. I was filed right off the typewriters where DM first worked. Made india, indianapolis, indiana, italy look funny. Editors were afraid reporters might think as well as observe, come to conclusions, have opinions, start to speak out with individual voices, persuade, influence, stuff like that. Maybe students would do some of those same things if they were allowed I. Become fascinated with what I was chasing. Discover things they knew. Felt strongly about. Begin to have opinions, voices, stuff like that. If they had an I."

I could do all that?

"Just might."